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George Landoeker Collection

early 1980s

Biographical notes

George Landecker, Biographical Notes

I was born on October 1, 1918, in Nordenburg which was then in East Prussia, a small town of about 3,000 people with about 10 Jewish families. We had a happy, peaceful life until the Nazis came to power in 1933. I finished the local gymnasium in 1934 but was not allowed to continue my education.

In 1934, I was sixteen years old when the world I had known collapsed and disappeared. My father lost most of his business and could not feed his family and I was not allowed to take the next step in my schooling. All of my friends disappeared and we became the scum of the earth and cause of any and all the illness that existed.

I got a job as an apprentice in a men's clothing factory in a much larger city about sixty miles away and for the first time became involved in mostly Jewish surroundings, except for my work place, which ended when work was done. Any sports activities, and social contact was with Jews only. We formed our clubs, most of them with Zionist orientation, since Palestine offered the best chance for immigration. I joined a non-Zionist club which had a more German orientation and was mostly made up of sons and daughters whose fathers had served in the German army. The Jewish Organization of Germany realized that there was no future in Germany and started retraining schools for youngsters in farming and other trades since it thought that immigration visas would be easier to obtain.

I applied and was accepted in a non-Zionist school called Gross Breesen. In 1936 many retraining schools were formed to prepare Jewish youth for emigration and training mostly in agriculture but also other trades. Most of these schools were Zionist and oriented toward Palestine, but Gross Breesen was non-Zionist and its early students were recruited from the youth group that I belonged to. I was picked and entered that school located in Silesia in May of 1936 after one and a half years as an apprentice in Koenigsberg.

I had no idea of what I wanted to be, except that I didn't want to be a farmer. My father had horses and my grand parents had two cows and I was exposed to them. That made me somewhat of an expert compared to the kids from the cities. We came there as youngsters whose education had been interrupted, whose world had disappeared, and we came under the influence of the head of the school who had been a psychology professor. He told us, "You are somebody. You can learn to be

a farmer or carpenter or mechanic and we will immigrate as a group to some foreign country and start a settlement, build on farming, German culture and Judaism. It gave us back our confidence in ourselves. I was there about one and a half years. We became a family that has guided most of the rest of our lives, with standards of honesty and hard work as established by Curt Bondy. He also introduced us to classical music and other classical events. Soon after entering the school I became acquainted with a couple that was a little older than I and we soon became good friends. They both had been at an university to study law, but soon realized that a German law degree was worthless in any foreign country, so switched over to agriculture. Because of their earlier experience, they were hired as instructors at Gross Breesen. Under their guidance, I started working in agriculture and soon learned to appreciate work and accomplishment. The couples' marriage at the farm in 1937 became one of several events that helped to form the group. The couple immigrated to Argentina but had to leave there because of rising anti-Semitism, and they went to Israel. Our friendship remained steady. I was asked to read the 90th psalm at their wedding and did the same in 1987 at their golden wedding. Our friendship remained intact/ I fell deeply in love with another student whose mother was American and anxious to take her family out of Germany. The father was dead. As part of my training, I was sent to a sheep farm in Bavaria and was there until September 1938 to get ready for immigration to the United States. While there a plan developed for a group of 30-40 students to immigrate to the USA. I became a member of that group. No plan for a larger group had materialized. I left there in September 1938 to be ready for immediate immigration. In November of 1938, I was arrested and sent to Buchenwald. The men at Gross Breesen were arrested around the same time, and also taken to Buchenwald, which was very helpful to me. For one thing, they had been allowed to bring blankets with them, and I hadn't been able to bring anything. To obtain my release, Toepper, a friend from Gros Breesen, obtained a visa for me to go to Holland. That was in January 1939. I just had time to say goodbye to my girlfriend and my family in East Prussia, and in February 1939 I entered Holland. I lived there with several hundred others in a camp that had a large farm, and we did the work in the dairy and the fields. All the people there were waiting to immigrate. My visa came in February, 1940 and I left for America together with four other Gross Breesen students. My girlfriend met me there, we spent two to three days in New York City, and left by Greyhound bus for the farm in Virginia which was suppose to be our home for the rest of our lives. Shortly after we arrived my girlfriend dumped me for someone else. I was heartbroken for a while.

Unfortunately the idea of the group farm did not work, and in June 1941 I left and got a job on a dairy farm in Pennsylvania. Here I acquired another girlfriend. She was an American and an artist and we were deeply in love. Early in 1942 I got another job on a mixed farm in Pennsylvania. I was my own boss. But the war had started and I wanted to serve my new country and help defeat the Nazis. So I entered the US Army, and was inducted into the infantry. I trained and served in Camp Wheeler, Georgia until July or August 1943. Here I became an American citizen and also got married on October 28th, 1943. I was stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland at the time. About July 1944 I was sent overseas and by way of Italy, I joined the 45th Infantry Division in the Voges Mountains in France as an assistant squad leader. I was a corporal. Then my time in France was interrupted by two hospital stays. The first was a lengthy stay that involved a transfer to England for minor operation. The second was for pneumonia on the night my unit was crossing the Rhine River into Germany. I rejoined my division in Germany and promptly was transferred from line company to division headquarter because of my knowledge of the German language. We saw some little fighting and ended the war by occupying Munich. I had wondered what it would be like entering Germany as a conquering hero, and American citizen seeking revenge for all it had done to me and the world. Instead it was a homecoming. I was a German and Hitler couldn't change that. I was transferred to military government of Germany and assigned to a small unit in a county in the state of Wuertenberg where I stayed until June 1946. My stay in Germany was uneventful but satisfying. I helped in starting democracy in a little corner of the country. The war ended In Japan the army discharged soldiers in a hurry, and gave us a chance to stay where we were and do the same job, but as civilian employees, at a vastly higher salary. I was interested in that because it would have given us a chance to save up some money. My captain wrote me a good recommendation, which I still have. I wrote Jessie and asked her to come to Germany, but she turned it down because she was afraid of the voyage. So that killed that idea.

I returned to the US and to Jessie, who lived in Philadelphia. It was steaming hot there. We saw some of Jessie's friends and she quit her job and we got out of there. I was an American. I had a wife. She had saved \$3000.00. We were rich. Everybody is rich in America. I wanted to be a farmer on my own. I didn't know where or how. One of my buddies for the past year was from Connecticut. We had become good friends and he returned with me and invited me to come and visit. I called him and we made that our first stop. They had a house on the coast. It was beautiful and cool. While there I got what I thought was an interesting idea. A Jewish lawyer friend wanted

to buy a farm in New York State or New England. It must be easily accessible either by car, train or air, and it must have two house or one big enough to have 2 apartments. He wanted to come out on weekends or vacation. He would pay me monthly wages plus a percentage of equity each year so I had part ownership. I told Jessie about it and she said No. I will not be a handmaiden to a Jewish woman. That had never been discussed and could have been ruled out, but she said no. Period. The next stop was at a farm also in Connecticut. A friend from Gross Breesen and also Virginia had been discharged earlier. He had married a Gross Breesen girl and they had been able to buy a farm with the help of an uncle who also had a farm. They were anxious for us to settle near them. I worked with him for a week, but soon found that we did not have enough money to buy a farm there. We had a good visit. We now invited ourselves to Utica, New York. We had a distant relative there. His daughter was a doctor. She had opened a practice there and had brought her parents and her son to live with her. Her father, my uncle, was a veterinarian and one-time part-owner of a farm. It was a difficult visit. But he encouraged me to look for a farm there, saying that this climate was very similar to where we came from. I contacted the Cooperative Extension service but they were very discouraging. It would be best to get some experience by getting a job on a farm. But I was stubborn and we contacted several real estate agents. I didn't like the first farm we looked at, but I immediately liked the second one. I spent several days working with the old farmer. It was August and he still was putting in the first cutting of hay. The crop was poor, but I thought that the soil was good. The asking price was \$13,000.00, much lower than in Connecticut. We offered to pay \$2000.00 down and then we found out how really poor we were. The bank would only give us \$7000.00 for a mortgage, even though the government would guarantee 50% of the mortgage. We were an unknown commodity. Fortunately the owner had had the farm on the market for a long time, and he was old and wanted to sell. So he offered to carry a second mortgage of \$4000.00. That closed the deal. I have found that people seemed to trust me once they knew me. The deal was struck and I became a farmer with a house, a barn, 20 Holstein cows, two horses, ninety-three acres of land and an old but workable set of horse-drawn farm equipment. In fact, I considered it a great improvement over my past experience, since it had a mechanical way of loading and unloading the hay. The former owners were unable to move into their new quarters, so they stayed in the upstairs. In return, he came out to the barn and showed me how to handle the various tools. He also introduced me to the feed store manager, the milk co-op manager, and various other people. He and his wife even took us to a dinner of the milk co-op, the Dairymen's League, which I joined. All

this was of great help to us. Jessie came out to help with the milking the first morning, but when she saw the farmer out there, she decided she was not needed and left and never returned. I had informed the lawyer, previously mentioned that I had bought a farm, but it was completely unsuitable for his purposes, but he insisted on coming to inspect it himself. He and his wife came up by train and agreed with me. We used most of our money to buy the basic necessities to start house-keeping.

We took possession on September 1st, 1946. The help of the former owner was invaluable and I got in touch with the Cooperative Extension Service. They tested the soil and found that it was badly in need of lime, but well-drained. Only thirty acres were plowable. The rest was pasture and very stony. I also found that most of the cows had freshened in the spring and were now relying for their feed on the after-growth in the harvested meadows. As winter came on they had to rely on the late harvested hay, which caused a drop in milk production and thus income. Somehow we managed. My mother had had the foresight to ask my father's brother in Chile for visas and they came in early 1939. I was included, but not one of my brothers. I was in Holland and had no intention to go to Chile. They tried to change my visa to my brother's, but were unsuccessful. They left Germany after the war had started, on the last boat that left Genoa, Italy. We have never found out what became of my brother. Soon after settling in Remsen, I received a letter from my two sisters and one brother saying that they wanted to immigrate to Palestine, and would I please take my parents. I agreed of course, and they arrived in April or May 1947 and moved into the upstairs in our house. My father helped me in the barn and I was soon able to find a job in a feedstore to earn some money and my dad took care of the barn after I had done the chores. I had hoped that Jessie would turn over the main cooking to my mother and she would pursue her art work. Unfortunately, Jessie did not do this, and my mother was marginalized. Jessie did all the cooking. After a few years my mother found employment in Utica, and after five years, my father followed her. In 1948 I got another help. The government, under the GI bill made training available for farmers. Classes were conducted twice weekly by an agriculture teacher at the high school. This helped me, and we also got a monthly allowance of \$98.00.

About that time I bought my first piece of equipment. A used, horse-drawn manure spreader. The daily job of doing that by hand was an unpleasant job, and I was glad to get rid of it. In 1948 I also bought a Ford 8N tractor with a loan from the local bank. The price of milk we received kept on falling, and it became evident that I needed to increase production if I wanted to stay in business.

To add more cows I needed more room, and the horses had to go. The tractor provided their power. We got up to thirty-three milkers with the help of the Extension Service, and a local mechanic and I designed a way, using the tractor, to load manure mechanically and eliminate a dirty job. It soon became clear to me that the quality of the forage had to be improved both in the summer and winter to increase the production of milk. I plowed, seeded and fertilized some of the pasture and used the electric fencing system of rotational grazing to give the cows fresh feed every few days.

To increase the quality of the winter forage it had to be harvested earlier when the weather was not suitable for curing, so I installed, with the help of the Extension Service, a fan system which blew air through the hay.

In order to plow up more acreage and increase yield, I started to plant more corn and built a silo to store it in. I then was able, after applying lime and fertilizer to plant higher yielding plants. They also were higher in protein. Mostly alfalfa.

With higher milk production came the need for an electric cooling system and a new milk house because the old one was completely inadequate. With the new silo came the question of filling the old one. I purchased a long elevator, which was run by a five horse electric motor and two wagons, for which I built large boxes with attachments for unloading the forage. In the silo it just dropped down, but for the dry hay, I needed something to unload and spread the forage in the barn. I had bought a shorter wooden elevator and my buddy the mechanic made the necessary adaptation to suspend this from the ceiling and have a spinner on the end to spread it. I thus was able to use the same equipment for both hay and corn. My mechanic buddy was invaluable in all this. I had the ideas and he made them possible.

My neighbor had proposed that we buy an Allis Chalmers Field-chopper together for harvesting. This arrangement did not last very long and it ended and so did the friendship. I bought a New Holland chopper and soon thereafter a second, much larger tractor to operate it. In 1953 an adjoining farm became available and I purchased it to stable my ever growing young stock and make room for more cows. And it also increased my need for planning for a new barn to reach about sixty milkers and thus justify the hiring of a full-time employee who was familiar with the routine of the farm.

As the farm grew, so did our family. In 1953 our first daughter, Heidi, was born, and in 1961, our second daughter, Heller joined the family.

After my father moved into Utica, I made do with hiring boys as needed. We also had a local high school boy living with us for several years. He had had a falling out with his father, a farmer, and his agricultural teacher asked me to give him a home. He highly recommended him. This turned out very well. He helped with the milking mornings and nights, he used my pick-up truck to go to school and delivered the milk on his way. He helped with the farm chores. It worked out very well, until Jessie accused him of stealing some money, which I doubted. But she insisted, and I had to fire him. I forget how much I paid him. I still could not hire full-time help, and mostly needed help in the summer. The Extension Service advised me that there were young fellows available, who had applied to the Cornell College of Agriculture and did not have the required experience of working on a farm. That turned out to be a very good arrangement for six or seven years. A Cornell professor would check up on them once or twice a year.

The herd kept expanding, some by purchase to increase income, mostly by raising replacements. In 1961 I bought an ice bank milk cooler and a transfer station to pump the milk directly from the barn to the tank.

By 1961 I had decided to build a new barn. With the help of the Extension Service I had inspected several structures, free stall or stanchion. I decided on a stanchion barn with room for sixty milkers. I hired two experienced carpenters to put up the basic design for a pole barn. After they were finished I hired one carpenter and for the first time, a full-time hired man. He and his family moved into the house on the second farm. He also had experience as a carpenter. He helped with the milking morning and night, and as needed, doing some farm work. But most of his time was spent with the carpenter building the barn while I did the farm work. We thus had the barn completed that year. A very simple pole barn with home made tie stalls. It became evident that with the larger volume of hay required for the larger herd, my system of chopping it was too slow. New Holland had come out the previous year with a baler that had an attachment to load the bales into a trailing wagon, thus one man could bale and load in one operation. A second man with another tractor would transport the load to the barn and with another mechanical system unload and distribute the bales for storage.

It also became clear that we had to rely more on the quality of the home-grown feed and less on manufactured grain. That meant planting corn earlier to give it a chance to mature enough in our short season and to cut the grass and alfalfa earlier in June to preserve the protein and to give the

second or third cutting a better chance. I found that the quantity of milk increased by following these practices.

While I developed the farm and became a farmer, Jessie was quietly developing her art career. She came up with a large portfolio with illustrations of animals that were part of an unwritten story, but one which she had in her mind. This was done in colorful paper cut outs, very realistic, but also very artistic and very pleasing to look at. I was completely unaware at the time that she was working on such a big project. I convinced her to take it to a local art school to maybe find a writer for her story, but mostly in my mind to introduce her to the local art community. Everyone was quite surprised and excited to see her work, and admired it. They didn't know a writer though, but invited Jessie to take classes at the school, which she did in pottery and enamel on copper. This worked well, and after not very long, the director asked her to take a part-time job and teach a class in enameling. Being involved at the institute encouraged her to exhibit some of her other work, which also was very encouraging and eventually led her to exhibit in many of the upstate New York galleries and led to some one-person shows. She also sold many of the paintings. That and her salary helped to support the meager farm income. Her involvement with the school led Jessie to accept their social invitations. It seems that she responded to the people in the art community easily, while it was not possible in the farm community. It thus meant that we met many interesting people, many of whom became our good friends, which carries through to the present time.

The new barn was built. It ended up that I assumed a debt of \$30, 000.00, which was, at that time, a big load. I had a chance to buy the farm on our east side, whose land I knew I needed to support the expanded stock. I turned it down because of the debt load. This was a big mistake, since the income from the rent of the house would have easily covered the extra payment on the debt. We lost our first hired helper after about two years and now started a period of unsteady helpers, changing almost yearly. Then I found a fellow in Connecticut with local roots who came to work for me. It seemed to be the ideal situation. He would take over the farm on my retirement. Then disaster struck one cold January day in 1968. I had finally reached the point where the milker string was complete with plenty of replacements in the heifer barn to take the place of the dry cows, when that January day a fire broke out in the heifer barn and killed twenty-five animals, destroyed a tractor and manure spreader, the barn and adjoining shed. Insurance covered some of the loss, but not all. Not very long afterwards, a second fire in the house where my employee lived, probably caused by his small son, damaged that house. He had to move out, and that ended his employment.

I had the house repaired and the next helper, Stanley, was by far the most competent and reliable man I ever had working for me. He also planned to take over on my retirement. I explained to him though that that would only come after I had paid off the large short-term loans that I had, caused by the fires, hopefully in five or six years. Unfortunately it took longer.

To replace the hay storage capacity, I decided to go the silage route, and had built a large silo. I had acquired the needed equipment and tractors. I had rented some extra acreage and also decided to grow more corn. We bought a 4 row corn planter which Stanley took over and operated as long as he worked for me. He also operated any and all the other machinery. He was most competent, probably more so than I. We had a good relationship. He and his wife came with us to the bi-monthly dinners held by the milk co-op, of which I had become president. But as time passed, I heard more and more stories of Stan attempting to buy other farms. He also offered me a partnership. I disliked the idea, and was strongly warned against it. It also involved me giving him half ownership of the farm without any compensation from him. Many other things happened to destroy our relationship, and he finally quit and bought a farm in northern New York.

Unfortunately our relationship ended badly. He had a summons served on me which I settled, and he stole several items of value to make up for some money he claimed I owed him. I got two other helpers, neither of them very good.

Farming had become more financially rewarding because Jimmy Carter pegged the price of milk to the cost of living. I was able to pay off all my debt. I also developed a sideline selling real estate, mostly farms, under a broker. Besides, I developed some arthritis in my knees, which made milking harder. That and the unsatisfactory help situation made me decide to put the farm on the market. I had reached a milk production level of 18,600 pounds per cow, which was very high. This and the good milk prices attracted several buyers. We had previously bought an old house in a neighboring village, which Jessie, with the help of a carpenter, had made ready for us. So, in February, 1980, I ended my life as a farmer.

Earlier, a member of our church who was a real estate broker had encouraged me to get a license as a real estate salesman, so as to assist if he had a farm listing. I did this by purchasing the books, and after studying them, I obtained my license. You were not required to attend classes at the time.

Nothing came of that, but in the late '70s, the Cooperative Extension Service had an inquiry for a real estate salesman by a different broker, and since they knew that I had a license, they recommended me, and I became a salesman, covering Oneida, Herkimer and Lewis county. I

thought of that to generate extra income and to give me something to do after I left the farm. I was quite busy and successful in listing and showing farms while still operating the farm.

Unfortunately, something happened to the first farm I listed. We had a signed purchase agreement and the buyer was already working part time at the farm, but the owner backed out of the deal without an explanation. I wanted to negotiate the commission deal with the farmer since I might have created a wrong impression with the owner because of my lack of training. But the broker took it out of my hands, and the farmer had to pay the commission. I got my part, but only kept what I thought my fair share for the work I'd done, and returned the larger part to the farmer. But that ended my association with that broker, just as the farm sale materialized.

Luckily another friend had just retired from being a social worker, and he had built up a sideline of doing the bookkeeping for small businesses and doing income taxes. His wife had done the posting for him but refused to do it any longer. Since it was also tax time, he was swamped with work and he asked me to do the posting for him. He gave me instructions and he made a bookkeeper out of me. I also started keeping books for some farmers and got appointed to some village and town committees.

Other friends of mine had volunteered for the Red Cross blood drives upon their retirement, and urged me to do the same, which I did. This turned into an extensive commitment.

I also took up downhill skiing and became fairly good at it and enjoyed it.

Both girls attended the local school in Remsen. They never were very involved in the farm, mostly because their mother didn't want the house to be smelling like the barn. Heidi did wash milking machines and the bulk tank for a while. Both were cheerleaders for the basketball team and I attended many games to watch them and the team. For much of the time Heidi was in high school, I served on the school board. Heidi was competitive, was on the high honor role, was president of her class and also valedictorian. Heller was on the honor roll without working very hard, and she was at the top of her class. When it came to college, I took Heidi to Stony Brook, mostly because a friend of mine was teaching there. She didn't like it. I then took her to Antioch in Ohio. She liked it and got a good scholarship and graduated after five years with a degree in Environmental Education. She started writing and had stories accepted in various magazines and after graduation had one published in the New Yorker, which helped her greatly, especially when she went to Cornell to get her master's degree in Environmental Education. But since she was published and especially in The

New Yorker, she got a side job in a literary journal and there she met the editor of the Atlantic Magazine, which led to an internship at that magazine and to being an editor.

Heller was accepted at Cornell, and couldn't leave home fast enough to get there. She had some problems at first until she figured out that in college you couldn't get along with just your smarts; you actually had to study to get good grades. Which she did, and got on the Dean's list and other honors. She graduated with a degree in Human Development and Family Studies. She went to Minneapolis, where she had various jobs mostly putting out fires, until she decided to get her Masters degree in Social Work and settled on being a psychotherapist. She had a major article published in a professional journal.

I was able to pay off all of Heidi's student loans. They were not very high. She had worked some. Heller's were much higher. I paid off all but one. By then I knew already that we would have a major reduction in income by 1996.

So here we were in the early 1980s, living comfortably in an old house, both girls in college. The house was probably valued at \$100,000, and we owned it free and clear. We had started an annuity which was to kick in when the mortgage was paid off and we were both getting social security. The mortgage payment from the farm plus some income from investments. We had more money coming in than we needed to live on. We could travel and we did.

Bondy's teaching fit well into our lives. Our lives after forty years in America and arriving with nothing; we were secure. We had proven, like many other immigration groups that with hard work and ingenuity you can achieve something and be somebody. I served in leadership in my community, the Extension Service and my Cooperative. All my efforts after retirement were mostly my way of saying "Thank you" to the community for accepting me and having given me the chance to become something that I always wanted to be.